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Baltimore Sun Headlines,
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a gay lit history zine number two.

by ben

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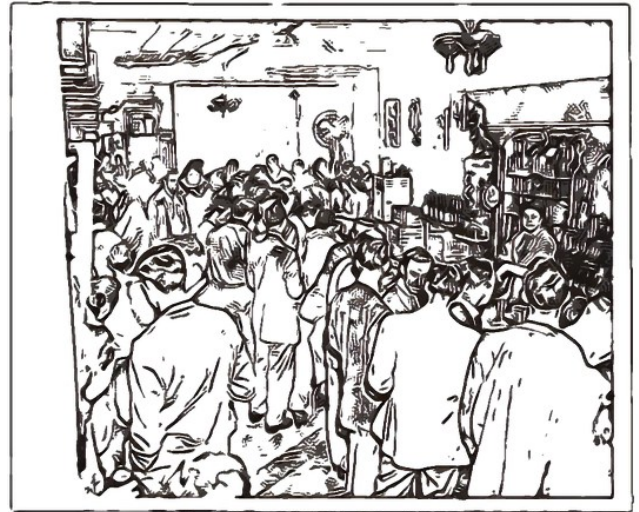
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People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has longer, boring, more academic articles I adapt these from. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you

If you have questions about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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I wanted to write about this era because we're in another period of backlash and repression coming from the federal government. It can be tempting to isolate, it can be easy to be paralyzed with fear and outrage. But that's not how queers have survived these times. We've survived by creating and maintaining spaces to meet each other, to care for each other, to have sex with each other, to be with each other, and build something together that can sustain us in handling oppression and in fighting against it. It's what we still need to be doing.

So go to a gay bar or a queer dance night somewhere. Create a transfem lesbian knitting circle. Have your favorite queers over for dinner. Support local drag. Buy coffee for a bisexual. Make things together, whether it's art or food or even--wait for it--a zine. Build community. That's how we get through the difficult times.

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The 1955 Raid that Broke the Baltimore Police

By Ben Egerman

June 2025

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There was zero evidence this was actually happening, but that didn't stop the government from purging thousands of queer employees. A cycle got going where an agency or department would be accused of being soft on communism, so they would fire as many queers as they could find to show how seriously they cared about national security. Congress got regular reports on how many "perverts" had been purged. Newspapers celebrated mass firings. The witch-hunts encouraged local authorities to do their own crackdowns. We're going to be looking at one of those crackdowns in Baltimore.

It wasn't a particularly great time to be a queer person working for the government. Or living in DC. Or nearby. Like in Maryland. But that's only part of the story. It was also an era when queer people were finding it easier to find one another, where queer spaces were popping up, and where queer culture was developing and becoming more visible.

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On Saturday, October 1st, 1955, a little after 11PM, the Baltimore Police Department's vice squad entered the Pepper Hill Club and arrested everyone inside thinking it'd be an easy way to score some quick political points.

They were wrong. Sucks to suck, jerks.

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Decades later, many members of the gay community who had frequented the Pepper Hill Club—again, shamefully only white community members—remembered the impact of the raid clearly. In an interview with several, one said, "That was the decision that made it okay. For gay people to be in a bar... Everything you can do in a gay bar these days stems from that arrest," Another put it simpler: "It was kind of like Stonewall."

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But what's interesting is what happened afterwards. The backlash was massive: police were denounced by two judges, state politicians, and the press. The police chief was summoned to the state capital to explain his actions. The vice squad was abolished. Most officers involved lost their jobs, some wound up in jail. It ended the police commissioner's career.

But most importantly, the BPD backed off mass raids on gay bars for over a decade.

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Ultimately, it came down to the Governor, who wasn't willing to fire him. He *did*, however, say that Hepbron had shown "poor judgement" hanging out with mafia bosses and said the scandals had crippled Hepbron's ability to lead. He suggested strongly—that maybe it was time for Hepbron to resign.

Hepbron refused, as he only had two years left in his term. Robinson kept up the pressure, and in 1961, the Governor quietly replaced him. James Hepbron would never work in law enforcement or government again.

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Inside, the usual rules of gender and sexuality could be somewhat suspended. Men could be flamboyant, women could be butch, and just generally, queers could be, uhhhh, queer. There were show tunes, and later—a lesbian rockabilly house band. It was queer, it was campy, and for anyone who had never been somewhere where they could let their guard down, walking in was nothing short of a revelation.

But shamefully, it wasn't like that for everyone:

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Hepbron once again promised to clean house, vowing to lead "the biggest BPD shakeup in three decades." More and more officers were suspended or quietly pushed into retirement, including former vice squad bully Edward Kirby—a man who David Lehman had once called an "ugly, fat, red-faced dick."

The probes continued working their way through the force's leadership, resulting in a number of resignations or firings and several other criminal charges. In early 1958, Forrester and Goldstein were put on trial, and they were both found guilty.

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If you asked patrons, I'm sure they would say it was the owner's decision. The owner would usually say it's the staff's discretion, and the staff would say they were just doing what the patrons wanted. They were all right. Overt racism among whites in Baltimore in the 50s and 60s was absolutely the norm. Hell, John Waters even made a movie (and then a musical) about it.

So while some cities had a norm of queer spaces rejecting segregation, many of Baltimore's white gay bars clung to it. In fact, Black queer resistance to racist bar owners and managers is a common throughline in the city's LGBTQ+ history. Black queer spaces did exist, but they were usually short-lived affairs or only welcoming on specific nights. A Black gay

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The Lead-Up:

By the time of the Pepper Hill raid, 1955 had already been a banner year for BPD repression against queer people. On New Year's Eve, they raided a private house party hosted by a Black public school teacher and his white partner, arresting eleven men for dancing together and kissing. Nine were convicted. The city dropped Charges against two HBCU professors, who were still outed and lost their jobs.

After reading this, a *Baltimore Afro-American* reader tipped off police about similar parties hosted by the "Friendship Club," a group of young Black men in West Baltimore (all 17 to 22). A party was raided and everyone was charged with sodomy or "perverted sex practices."

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It might be surprising to see this level of pushback in the conservative 1950s. But the BPD had been under fire for years for corruption and misconduct. Critics like Robinson saw the raid as just one more example of the department's corruption and abuse of power

In 1951, a Grand Jury accused BPD of widespread bribe-taking, implicating the captains of multiple police stations and begging the police chief to start an investigation. He didn't. The next year, a different jury complained about police having low morale because of the allegations and bravely decided to drop the matter.

Just one day before the Pepper Hill raid, Commissioner Hepbron acknowledged that a member of the vice squad was under investigation for taking protection money from bookies and club owners. He promised to start investigating allegations of corruption and brutality. The city Liquor Board launched its own probe into police behavior in Baltimore's vice zones—including around Pepper Hill.

Routine crackdowns and small raids here and there were common. In 1953, 19 were arrested in a raid on Paul's Tavern, another gay bar. That same year, undercover cops arrested men cruising in the central Enoch Pratt Free Library bathrooms. It wasn't confined to queer spaces, either. Strip clubs on the Block faced constant police harassment, and the area's bookstores were targeted for selling porn. At a time where the heterosexual nuclear family was practically worshipped (aka the Leave It To Beaver Era) the BPD worked overtime to suppress the seedier aspects of life in Baltimore City.

And, it wasn't just local—this all was happening with the backdrop of the Lavender Scare. The government and media portrayed "sexual deviants" as national security risks, as anti-American, as dangerous, and most importantly—as a public problem that the state needed to "fix." This context gave the police wide latitude to repress queers. The exposure of teachers and government employees in raids justified itself: the police were doing their job to rid our institutions of the homosexual menace.

Baltimore police clearly leaned into this moral panic. Right after the Pepper Hill raid, a spokesperson claimed that most arrestees were from D.C. which was, shock

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It might be surprising to see this level of pushback in the conservative 1950s. But the BPD had been under fire for years for corruption and misconduct. Critics like Robinson saw the raid as just one more example of the department's corruption and abuse of power

In 1951, a Grand Jury accused BPD of widespread bribe-taking, implicating the captains of multiple police stations and begging the police chief to start an investigation. He didn't. The next year, a different jury complained about police having low morale because of the allegations and bravely decided to drop the matter.

Just one day before the Pepper Hill raid, Commissioner Hepbron acknowledged that a member of the vice squad was under investigation for taking protection money from bookies and club owners. He promised to start investigating allegations of corruption and brutality. The city Liquor Board launched its own probe into police behavior in Baltimore's vice zones—including around Pepper Hill.

Routine crackdowns and small raids here and there were common. In 1953, 19 were arrested in a raid on Paul's Tavern, another gay bar. That same year, undercover cops arrested men cruising in the central Enoch Pratt Free Library bathrooms. It wasn't confined to queer spaces, either. Strip clubs on the Block faced constant police harassment, and the area's bookstores were targeted for selling porn. At a time where the heterosexual nuclear family was practically worshipped (aka the Leave It To Beaver Era) the BPD worked overtime to suppress the seedier aspects of life in Baltimore City.

And, it wasn't just local—this all was happening with the backdrop of the Lavender Scare. The government and media portrayed "sexual deviants" as national security risks, as anti-American, as dangerous, and most importantly—as a public problem that the state needed to "fix." This context gave the police wide latitude to repress queers. The exposure of teachers and government employees in raids justified itself: the police were doing their job to rid our institutions of the homosexual menace.

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of shocks, a complete lie. This didn't stop the cops from saying it was happening because DC police were running a new "drive on homosexuals in the nation's capital" that threatened to overrun Baltimore. The message was clear: Baltimore wouldn't be a safe haven for D.C. deviants.

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The Raid

One Saturday night in 1955, 22-year-old art student David Lehman was at his usual weekend haunt flirting with a tall, handsome classmate named Roger. Roger loved dogs, David did not. So, naturally, he pretended to be fascinated, asking about breeds and making small talk, hoping he could play his cards right and they'd spend the night together.

But then he noticed that the bar felt more crowded. Two men climbed onto tables with cameras and began taking flash photos. At first, the crowd played along, campily striking poses and joking. But David felt the mood shift as people got restless:

The next month, police made good on their threat, dragging club owners Mort Cohen and Victor Lance into court for running a "disorderly house."

This time, the judge had even less patience for the cops. Judge James K. Cullen not only threw the charges out—he said the police's actions should be "severely condemned." He accused them of lying about the raid's spontaneity and said they could've "quietly" targeted *individual* homosexuals instead of arresting everyone in a legal, licensed business. He ruled the police actions illegal and their credibility shot. As he dismissed the case, the courtroom erupted in cheers.

The next day, *The Sun* ran a sharply worded editorial titled "The Police Did It the Wrong Way," agreeing with Cullen. They felt that police should have only arrested individuals (for being homosexual) and not everyone in the bar (some of whom might not even *be* homosexuals). If a place is a problem, they said, police should just get the Liquor Board to shut it down legally and bureaucratically. How enlightened.

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Humiliated, Sergeant Goldstein told the press he'd bring charges against the bar's owners instead. This, it turns out, was not a great idea.

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The Backlash:

The fallout from the Pepper Hill raid came quick. BPD leadership distanced themselves and said they knew nothing ahead of time. By Monday, Jerome Robinson, a State Delegate from Baltimore, slammed the BPD for the mass arrest and Goldstein for appointing himself the judge of community morals.

Robinson wasn't exactly an ally to queer folks, though. He saw homosexuality as a mental illness and believed psychiatrists, not police, should handle what he called "the public problem of massing homosexuals in licensed establishments." Still, he saw the raid as an unacceptable overreach.

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Jails overflowed. David and Roger were crammed into a tiny cell with another man, shaken, sleepless, and worried about what would come next. The biggest fear was public exposure—papers often printed names after raids, and the consequences could be life-ruining. Luckily for them, only the owners and staff were listed. As it turns out, the cops had arrested too many homosexuals for the *Sun* to even name.

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They hauled everyone into court Sunday morning, where Magistrate Meyer M. Cardin (father of future Senator Ben Cardin) was roused to deal with the chaos.

While *The Sun* downplayed it as "several outbursts," David recalled it as total mayhem. The bar's energy followed them into the courtroom—some strutted down the aisle like drag queens on a catwalk; others openly mocked police testimony. A hallway full of lesbians heckled the cops. An officer David described as an "ugly, fat, red-faced dick," claimed someone had "touched his privates," and a voice from the crowd shouted, "Who would bother?"—to laughter and applause. David described it all as "outrageous." The lead officer, Sergeant Hyman Goldstein, complained that "the majority of these people seem to regard this whole incident as a great big joke."

Cardin was clearly annoyed at the police for bringing him in on a Sunday morning. After two defendants nervously pled guilty, he offered them a do-over once he heard the paper-thin evidence. When shown the photos, he said he saw only "a crowd having a good time on a Saturday night." The rest of the police case boiled down to one officer saying a man had touched his leg and vague claims of hand-holding and kisses.

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